

Report on Tell al-Imsihly: The 2000 and 2001 Seasons

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Introduction

This article summarizes two seasons of excavations at Tell al-Imsihly (تل (الامسيحي حلّي), a prehistoric site nearly 5 kilometers south of Assur. Archaeological excavations were conducted by Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) over a period of two seasons starting in April 2000 and ending in late 2001. Iraqi archaeologists working at Assur were put in charge of investigating the site. Due to damage and incursions on the site from plowing and earthmoving activities, the goals of SBAH's excavations were to obtain an idea of settlement chronology and activity within and just outside of Tell al-Imsihly.

In 2006-2007, Dr. Altaweel collaborated with the Iraqi archaeologists who had excavated the site in order to assist in interpreting some of the archaeological data as well as publication of the excavations to a wide audience. Some original items and records from the excavations are not currently available, and perhaps lost, but the archaeological report compiled by Mr. Hamza and written in Arabic remains. In addition, many of the ceramic drawings and excavation photographs have survived. The data presented by the Arabic report are the basis of the presentation to follow, although some additional details have been provided by Altaweel.

Site Background

Tell al-Imsihly is located on the west bank of the Tigris along Wadi al-Imsihly, a wadi that flows north to south. Wadi al-Imsihly flows into Wadi al-Shbabit, which is a wadi that flows into the Tigris from west to east. Wadi al-Imsihly is nearly 6 m in depth and 7 m in width and is often full of water in the rainy season. The site is located near the village of Khanuqa and Jebel Khanuqa. Figure 1 shows the approximate location of the site in relation to Assur and the Tigris. The exact coordinate location of the site is unknown, although the site shown in Figure 1 is very likely near, within one to two kilometers, the actual location.

Initially, Tell al-Imsihly was estimate to be roughly 50 x 40 meters in size and characterized by three slightly rising mounds (Figure 2). The surface of the site contains numerous scattered graves. Just underneath the surface and the graves, walls made of mud plaster (*tauf*) are evident, although some areas are heavily damaged by the graves and other earthmoving activities. Ceramic remains recovered from the surface and debris mounds formed by non-archaeological excavations were initially dated to the Ubaid and Samarra periods. In the Samarra and Ubaid periods, other areas outside of the estimated area of Tell al-Imsihly show some potential evidence of having an association with the mounded site. These areas maybe considered a part of Tell al-Imshihly, but this not clear.

Summary of the Levels

Excavations consisted of soundings, which will be discussed shortly, and horizontal excavations. The latest period of human activity at the site occurred in the Ubaid; the site served as a clear cemetery during this period. The graves are located along the three main mounds of the site (Figure 2). To the south of the cemetery and mounds, a possible settlement or work area related to the cemetery was found.

During the Samarra period, the three mounded areas at Tell al-Imsihly were settled with rectilinear houses. In addition, evidence for Samarra settlement was found southeast of these mounds. This shows that the Samarra settlement either extends beyond the initial dimensions of Tell al-Imsihly or settlement shifted during the period to different areas near and within the site. In addition to the Samarra remains found at the three mounds, Hassuna remains were found in the earliest construction phase. This indicates the influence of the Hassuna culture in the earliest settlement at Tell al-Imsihly. In addition to Hassuna cultural remains, the earliest level does have Samarra remains, indicating a mixed Hassuna/Samarra level.

Excavations

Sounding A: The first sounding excavated is located on the highest point of the mounded site, which contains more incursions and non-archaeological excavations than any other area. The test square measures 6 x 6 m and descends a total of 1.6 m before reaching virgin soil. The sounding is characterized as having six levels of natural and archaeological materials, within which there are three clear archaeological floors. Level 1 does not contain any archaeological materials; however, as the horizontal excavations will present, the level is Ubaid in date based on the pottery found in the graves of that level. Level 1's remains as well as the other levels' remains are characterized in Table 1.

Level	Period
Level 1 consists of natural soil and reaches 50 cm in depth.	None
Level 2 contains 30 cm of archaeological material and soil.	Samarra
Archaeological floor is roughly 5-10 cm thick.	Samarra
Level 3 contains 15 cm of archaeological materials and soil.	Samarra
Archaeological floor that is roughly 5-10 cm thick.	Samarra
Level 4 is 35 cm of natural dust.	None
Level 5 is an archaeological layer and floor 5-10 cm thick.	Hassuna/Samarra
Level 6 is mostly natural soil and level.	None
Virgin Soil	None

Table 1. Summarized results from Sounding A.

Sounding B: This sounding was excavated 175 m directly southeast of the main mounds and the Ubaid cemetery of Tell al-Imsihly. Pottery dating to the Samarra period is on the surface of this area, and this prompted a 12.5 x 15 m sounding to be excavated. Few remains are found in the one level that was exposed; however, one clear floor dating to the Samarra period, lying at a depth of 75-90 cm below the surface, is evident. The floor is made of compacted and inclusion-free clay with a thin layer of ash on top of it. In addition, some wall remains, measuring 40-80 cm in width, are found in the excavation, but none of these architectural finds are well preserved. Finds from the trench include cylindrical vessels with holes drilled in the bases. The occupation

does not appear to be long lasting, but the finds indicate that the Samarra period settlement extended southeast of the mounded site or settlement shifted during the Samarra period.

Sounding C and Area C: The sounding is located 310 m directly south of Sounding A. At the top of an elevated area that has a large quantity of Ubaid ceramics and kiln wasters on the surface, an L-shaped sounding was excavated. The dimensions of the sounding are not specified in the original Arabic report. After beginning excavations, a circular clay kiln was uncovered 70 cm below the surface. No walls are found in the sounding, and the debris material consists of mixed pottery sherds, kiln waste, dust, and ash.

Five other soundings were excavated just south of the main sounding in Area C in order to find evidence of an Ubaid occupation. In one of the soundings, Sounding 4, three round kilns, two of which each had a divider spanning half the diameter of the kiln, were found. The kilns have diameters of 70, 125, and 175 cm, with the larger two kilns having the dividers. These installations are all found 10 cm below the surface. In Sounding 5, evidence of a crooked and zigzagging wall was exposed, with the wall measuring 10 m in length and having a width of 50-60 cm. There is evidence of a platform within 2 m distance from the wall; this installation measures 150 x 80 cm. The only archaeological remains the other three soundings contain are Ubaid period pottery sherds.

The soundings conducted to the south of the main site suggest to the excavators that the area was used for ceramic production, given the discovery of the pottery kilns. The ceramics found in the Ubaid cemetery, which will be discussed shortly, may have been produced in the setting of Sounding C and Area C. Evidence of the crooked wall and platform may indicate the work and/or living area for those involved in the making of the burial ceramics.

Horizontal Excavations: The horizontal excavations cover an area of 1400 m² and exposed a large percentage of the three mounds at Tell al-Imsihly. The goal was to give a better idea of the Ubaid cemetery and extent of the Hassuna/Samarra period settlement discovered underneath the graves. While Level 1 is characterized by the Ubaid graves, Level 2 shows evidence of a Samarra period settlement. Unfortunately, many of the walls and houses of Level 2 are heavily damaged or destroyed. Level 2 is divided into three phases, which are named Phases 1-3 and correspond to Levels 2, 3, and 5 in Sounding A respectively. The earliest phase of Level 2 has mixed Hassuna/Samarra cultural remains. The later two phases of Level 2, on the other hand, show exclusively Samarra period remains.

Level 1 has a total of 356 graves which all date to the Ubaid period; Altaweel suggests that the majority of the graves are likely to be contemporary with the late Ubaid (i.e. Ubaid 3-4) in southern Mesopotamia. Although the graves are generally spread over the entire mounded site, the graves do largely concentrate in the east and south regions of the burial area, as Figure 2 indicates. A number of the graves were excavated and indicate information on burial practice in the Ubaid. Skeletons were found facing east and put in a fetal position; some of the skeletons face upwards, but only a few skeletons were found to be in this position. Most graves have ceramic vessels buried either next to the head and/or feet and have styles resembling those from southern Mesopotamia. A relatively small percentage of the ceramics are undecorated or decorated with only incised markings. The majority of the graves are lined with two rows of mud bricks (10 x 25 x 25 cm), often along the side the skeleton faces. The other notable observation from this level is that no domestic structures are found associated with the level. The pottery

finds will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. Figure 3 shows examples of graves found in the cemetery.

Level 2 contains clear evidence of a settlement; however, very few walls were found intact or even largely complete. This level is considered to have a total of three building phases (Phases 1-3), but many areas exposed show no evidence of all three phases. Despite the fact that Sounding A has evidence of a gap in settlement between Levels 3 and 5, Phases 2 and 3 do not have a clear gap in places where these phases are present.

One relatively well preserved structure was found at the summit near the location of Sounding A (Figure 4). This structure is likely to be typical of the houses at Tell al-Imsihly, but other structures were too damaged to make this claim certain. The house contains walls made of *tauf* (or mud plaster) that are 75 cm in width, has at least two phases (Phase 1 and 2), and includes seven total rooms. After the end of Phase 1, the house was abandoned. Among the features in the house, Room 3 has a storage bin in the west part of the room that is made of plaster. In the architecture of Phase 2 (i.e. Level 3 in Sounding A), some of the floors in the house are paved with a white colored plaster (Figure 5). Remains of water basins are found in some of the rooms' corners; the basins are rounded, rectangular, and oval in shape. The diameters of these basins range between 85-95 cm, with likely heights of these features ranging between 10-30 cm. There are a total of six door sockets within the structure and found *in situ* in the entrances connecting the rooms. Just outside the structure, to the southeast, a platform installation that measures 100 x 150 cm was uncovered. The past function of this installation is unclear. The general architectural characteristics of this structure such as the rectilinear walls and rooms, wall thickness and lengths, and *tauf* construction are similar to other Samarra period structures such as Tell as-Sawwan near Samarra (El-Wailly and Abu es-Soof 1965).

Heavily damaged walls are found in most of the areas within the horizontal excavations, with many of the wall remains measuring no more than 30-45 cm in length and width (Figure 6). Remains from some of the damaged structures indicates at least two phases of construction, similar to the more complete house discussed previously. In some of the heavily damaged houses, closed entrances and wall additions were found. Some excavated areas show evidence of having three successive phases (Phases 1-3), roughly corresponding to Levels 2,3, and 5 in Sounding A. These continuous phases perhaps suggest an occupation that lasted for some extended period. The earliest phase, Phase 3, has evidence of Hassuna and Samarra ceramic remains. Apart from the relatively well preserved structure discussed, no other mostly preserved structure was exposed.

Pottery

Level 1 horizontal excavations: Pottery from this level is described as mostly being inclusion-free, tan/straw colored clay fabric, and having monochrome black, brown, or orange paint. In addition to painted wares, incised and undecorated wares were found. The incised wares generally have simple linear patterns and are rarer. Example wares from this level are indicated in Figures 7-9. Many of the painted pottery styles found are similar to stylistic decorations from the late Ubaid period of southern Mesopotamia. Similar remains to those at Tell al-Imsihly are found at numerous southern Mesopotamian sites including Eridu (Safar *et al.* 1981), Tell Uqiar (Lloyd *et al.* 1943), Tell al-'Oilie (Courtois 1996), and sites in the Hamrin region (Moon and Roaf 1984:154; Jasim 1985). Northern Mesopotamian sites such as Tepe Gawra (Tobler

1950:Pl.74), Tell Khanijdal East (Wilkinson et al. 1996:27-32), and Tell al-Khwein (Altaweel 2006:173) have revealed similar remains to Tell al-Imsihly.

Deep bowls and cups (Figure 7:1-11) are types of ceramics that are common in Tell al-Imsihly's graves. These wares are usually made from inclusion-free clay, well fired, and decorated with painted designs. Common elements found in deep bowls and cups include convex-shaped external bodies, flaring and simple rims, and flat bases. Some common painted designs include half-circles and triangles (Figure 7:1). Many of the deep bowls and cups are decorated with painted horizontal or vertical lines spanning across the body (Figure 7:5-10). A small number of the ceramics are not decorated and plain in appearance, but a few of these types did have handles attached to the body (Figure 7:3). Many of the deep bowls and cups are small with heights of these wares not being greater than 17 cm, diameters approximately 18.5 cm or less, and having bases nearly 10 cm wide.

Shallow bowls and plates (Figure 7:12-21) found in the graves and dated to the Ubaid are typically conical in shape, featured simple rims, contained wide mouths, and have flat bases. Many of the wares have external bodies that are bent in a concave shape, but a significant number have convex external bodies. The colors of the painted designs are black, dark and light brown, and orange. Even though the painted styles of the plates do resemble southern Mesopotamian types, the ceramic fabrics are mostly poorly fired, and only a few wares show evidence of being well- or overfired. The applied clay from bowls and plates did contain visible inclusions. The inclusions and underfired clays indicate that many of the bowls and plates are most likely locally made and imitated southern Mesopotamian styles. The most common painted pottery styles include wares with wide arched strips that span across the inside body and sometimes contain other designs within or between the wide arched stripes (Figure 7:12-15). Other designs include half circles on the inside of the ware and along the rims (Figure 7:17-19). Some of the wares are decorated with thick horizontal linear patterns that incorporated some geometric or wavy line designs within the linear designs (Figure 7:21). One example of a ware with a painted design similar to a Maltese cross shape was found in the graves (Figure 8). Another element seen in these wares is stepped patterns that resembled remains from Eridu's Level 8 ceramics (Safar *et al.* 1981:181). In addition to the painted wares, some unpainted ceramics were found, including wares with incised holes on the inside part of the body (Figure 7:16).

Finds of medium and small sized jars were made in some of the graves (Figure 9). Jars are generally made with inclusion-free clay and well-fired. Some of the jars include those with decorative handles and spouts; however, most of the types found do not have these elements. Common designs incorporate elliptical or rounded middle areas of the body (e.g. Figure 9:5-8,10-12), everted rims (e.g. Figure 9:1-3,7-9), and painted plant designs (Figure 9:3,8). Other painted geometric styles include triangular (Figure 9:1,2,5), checkered (Figure 9:9), and half circle designs (Figure 9:6,11). A small number of jars are not decorated and plain in appearance (Figure 9:4) or decorated with incisions (Figure 9:12).

Level 2 horizontal excavations: Although no complete vessels were found in the horizontal excavations, this level contains ceramic sherds that are clearly dated to the Samarra period. The level's pottery is divided within three phases. Phases 1 and 2, which are the youngest phases, have styles that include the so-called "dancing ladies" pattern (Figure 10:15-17), bird depictions (Figure 10:1), and geometric designs (Figure 10:2-4,11,12). Similar remains to these styles are found at such sites as Nineveh (Gut 1995:Tb. 45), Yaram Tepe 1 (Merpert and Munchaev

1993:89), Choga Mami (Oates 1969:137), Tell Baghouz (Nieuwenhuyse *et al.* 2001:150), and Tell es-Sawwan (Abu es-Soof 1968:Pl. 10; Abu es-Soof 1971:Pl.19,1). Phase 3, the older phase, has patterns that are similar to Hassuna styles, including incised herringbone patterns (Figure 10:5,6) commonly seen at such sites as Hassuna and other northern Mesopotamian sites (Lloyd and Safar 1945:Fig. 13; Gut 1995:Tb. 4). The Hassuna styles found are both painted and incised. This phase, however, does include designs more typical of Samarra styles such as the geometric patterns that have been discussed (e.g., Figure 10:13,14). What the finds in Phase 3 indicate is that the earliest phase, at least in the areas where Phase 3 was found, appears to be a mixture of Hassuna and Samarra pottery, and only by Phases 1-2 did more classic Samarra wares completely dominate the site.

Sounding B wares: Two complete vessels found in Sounding B are worth noting because they are relatively rare. These two vessels were found on the Samarra period floor; however, these two wares are not typical from this period. The first vessel is decorated with incised lines along the body and a star-shaped design near a top opening. The vessel contains a second opening in the bottom (Figure 11:1). This second opening may have been used to prevent the vessel from breaking or cracking during the firing process. There is a small incision on the left side of the vessel, which was probably used to hang the vessel. The second vessel is cylindrical in shape and has openings on top and bottom (Figure 11:2). Both these vessels seem to have been used for liquid storage, and there is a possibility that Figure 11:1 was employed for milk churning. In addition to being unusual finds for a Samarra period level, these vessels are uncommon for this sounding because they are the only complete vessels from the level and few other types of objects were uncovered.

Small Finds from the Horizontal Excavations

Relatively few non-ceramic small finds were made in all the areas excavated in the horizontal excavations. Two exceptions are small seals made of clay and plaster (Figure 12), which were found in the debris from the incursions made on the site prior to SBAH's excavations. The dates of these objects are uncertain. Level 2 from the horizontal excavations does have a majority of the small finds, which primarily include stone implements and fragments. These stone tools and detritus consist of arrows, flakes, blades, scrapers, sickles, and axes. A few of the stone flakes are from obsidian, but a majority of the stone objects are made from flint. Some bone tools, primarily bone needles, and spindle whorls were found. Other small finds include door sockets from the relatively well preserved structure found in Level 2. In fact, almost all of the non-ceramic finds were found inside the rooms of the structures uncovered in Level 2. Overall, small finds from the soundings within the mounded site and just beyond are rare.

Conclusion

In summarizing the significant finds from Tell al-Imsihly, several noteworthy conclusions are evident. Based on the findings from Level 1 in the horizontal excavations, the Ubaid style ceramics show strong similarities to southern Mesopotamian Ubaid wares. The pottery finds from this level suggest that the inhabitants of the region were heavily influenced by southern Mesopotamian culture. The Ubaid wares from Tell al-Imsihly are different from many northern Mesopotamian Ubaid sites. Numerous sites in northern Mesopotamia, particularly further to the

north of Tell al-Imshly, are not as heavily dominated by southern Mesopotamian painted styles; often there is a mixture between southern and northern Mesopotamian stylistic elements such as at the site of Tell Ziyadeh in Syria (Hole 2001:85), sites in the north Jazirah (Altaweel 2006:170), and sites in Turkey (Algaze 1990). Although the painted designs are very similar to southern Mesopotamian styles, particularly to patterns from the late Ubaid period, many or most of the Ubaid wares were likely made locally and not imported. Further analysis, however, would be required to certify the true origin of the pottery finds. The area of Sounding C/Area C, which is roughly 300 m south of the cemetery, could have been contemporary to the burials, based on the pottery finds made in the soundings there. This area does appear to have been used for ceramic making, with several pottery kilns found in the soundings. Although the soundings in this area show the possibility of an Ubaid period settlement, the findings do not definitely indicate that there was any significant settlement activity in the area.

In the Hassuna/Samarra phases, the site may have been a settlement that was occupied for some length of time. This is suggested by the relatively continuous debris in some of the houses from the horizontal excavations. The presence of Hassuna-like pottery in Level 2 Phase 3 indicates that the site was initially influenced by this culture and then subsequently influenced by more common Samarra styles. The sherds that have Hassuna styles indicate fairly southern influence of this culture; however, relatively few sherds datable to the Hassuna period were found. In contrast to the possibility of a relatively lengthy Hassuna/Samarra occupation, and in Altaweel's opinion, Phases 1-3 could have each been relatively short periods. The Level 2 Phases 1-3 *tauf* constructed houses may have been refurbished rather frequently. In fact, *tauf* is a material that generally has a somewhat short lifespan without constant maintenance. This suggests that the structures of Level 2 would have undergone almost constant rework. In addition, there may have been abandonment in some parts of the site between Phases 2 and 3, as suggested by findings of Sounding A (i.e. Level 3 and 5 in Sounding A). Only Phases 1 and 2 show clear architectural continuity in Level 2's horizontal excavations. The relatively complete structure from Phases 1 and 2 demonstrates that Tell al-Imshly's Samarra period structures are similar to structures found at such sites as Tell es-Sawwan. By the end of Phase 1, the lack of non-pottery finds in the horizontal excavations and soundings indicates that the site was abandoned during the Samarra period. In Sounding B, the occupation seems to have been more short-lived than the mounded site, which reveals that settlement could have shifted during the Samarra period in different areas near Tell al-Imshly or even within the site. Further archaeological investigations between Sounding B and the mounded site would certify if the entire zone connecting those two areas was settled during the Samarra period.

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Figures

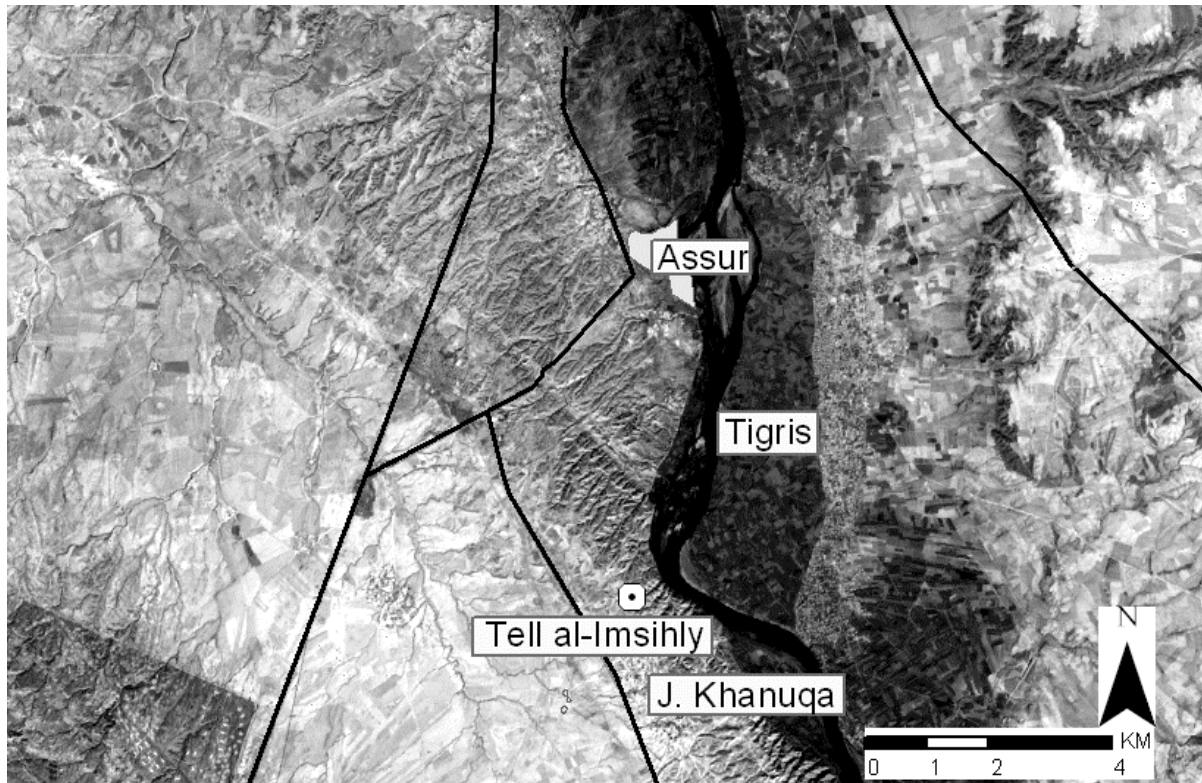


Figure 1. Image showing the region just to the south of Assur and the approximate location of Tell al-Imsihly. The exact coordinate location of the site is uncertain, but it is near the site indicated.

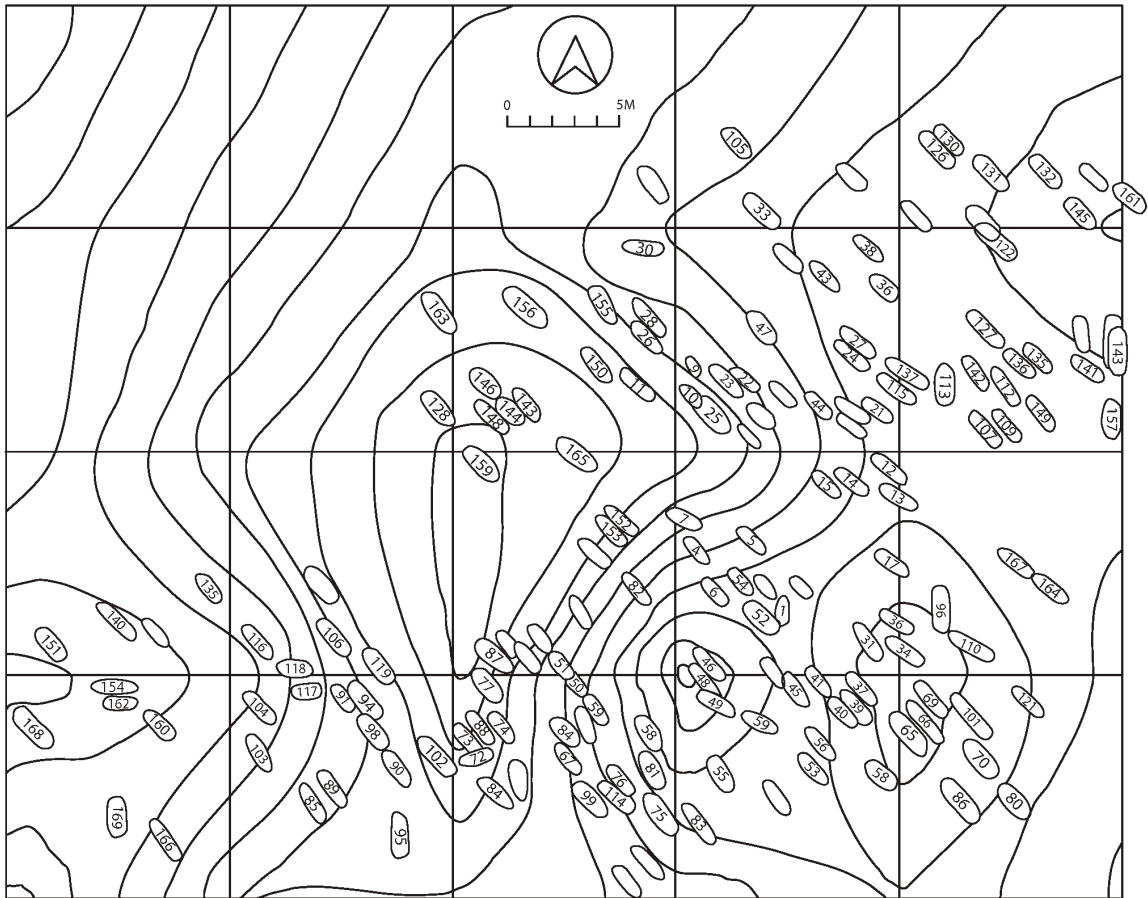


Figure 2. Contour map of Tell al-Imsihly showing the main site with the Ubaid period cemetery. Each contour line represents 1 meter in elevation.



Figure 3. Examples of Ubaid period graves found at Tell al-Imsihly. Both graves show skeletons buried with Ubaid vessels. The grave on the left was found facing upward, while the grave on the right was found lying on the side.

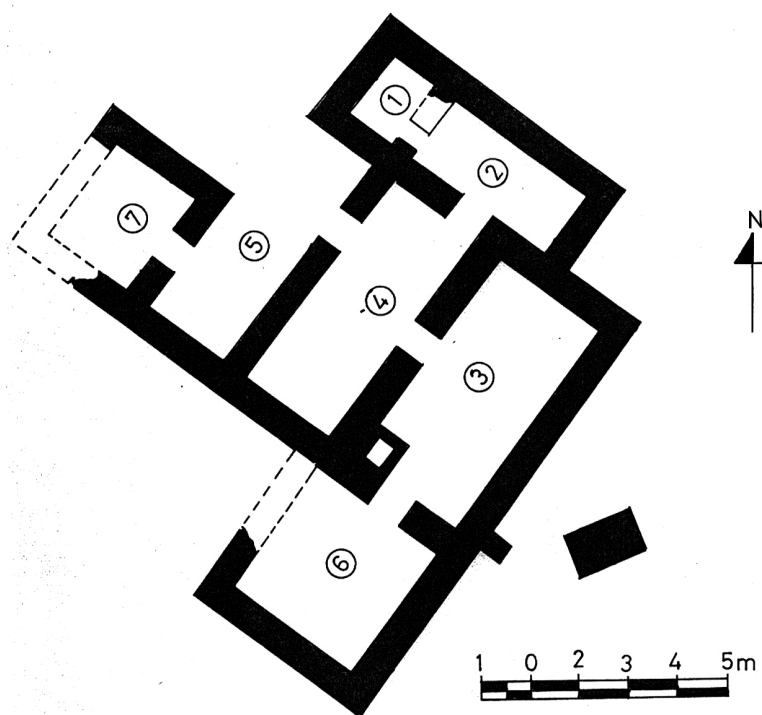


Figure 4. Plan of a Samarra period house found in the horizontal excavations.



Figure 5. Samarra period plastered floor from Level 2 Phase 2 in the horizontal excavations.



Figure 6. Level 2 of the horizontal excavation is shown, including Samarra period wall remains made from *tauf*.

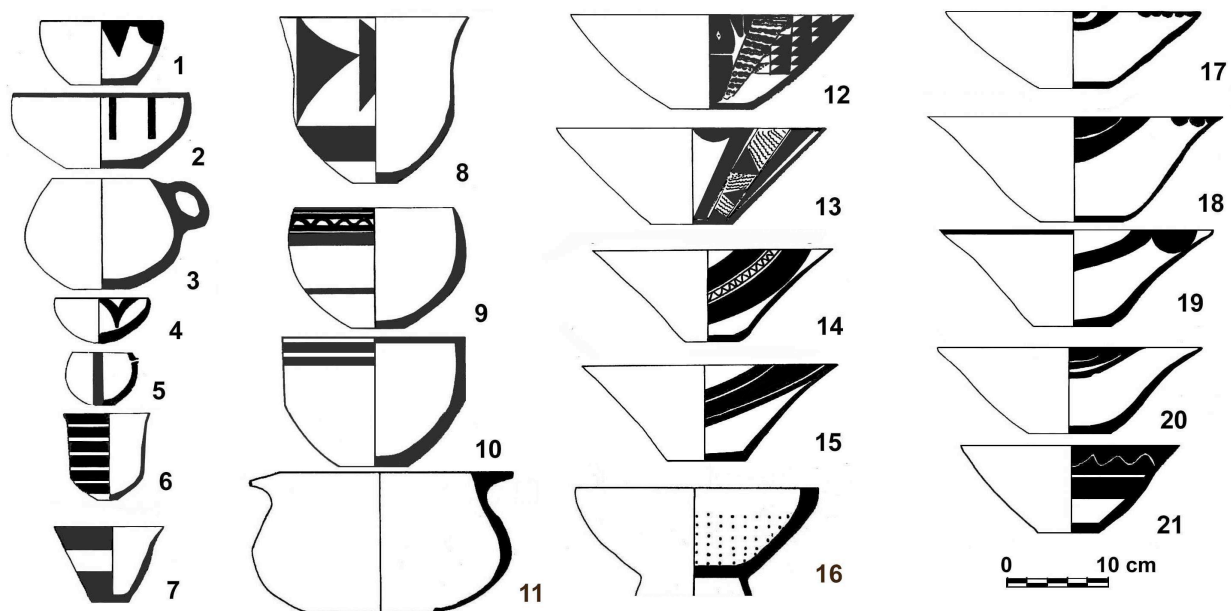


Figure 7. Ubaid pottery found in the graves of Tell al-Imsihly.



Figure 8. Ubaid ceramic plate with painted Maltese cross-like design.

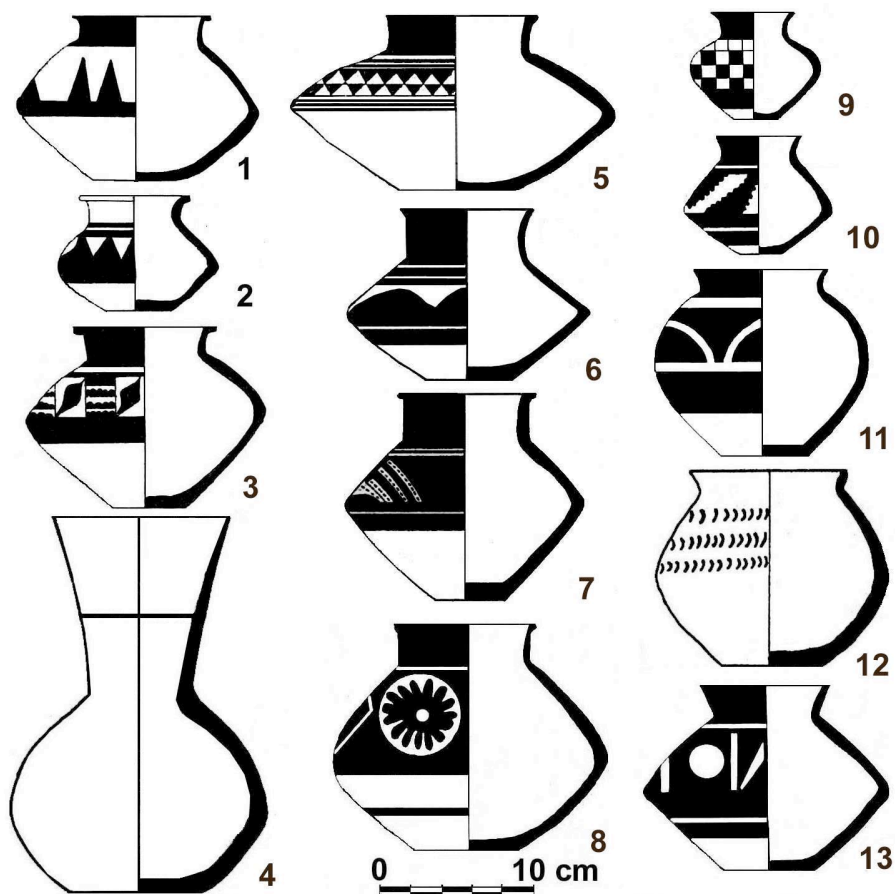


Figure 9. Pottery dated to the Ubaid period found in the graves of Tell al-Imshily.

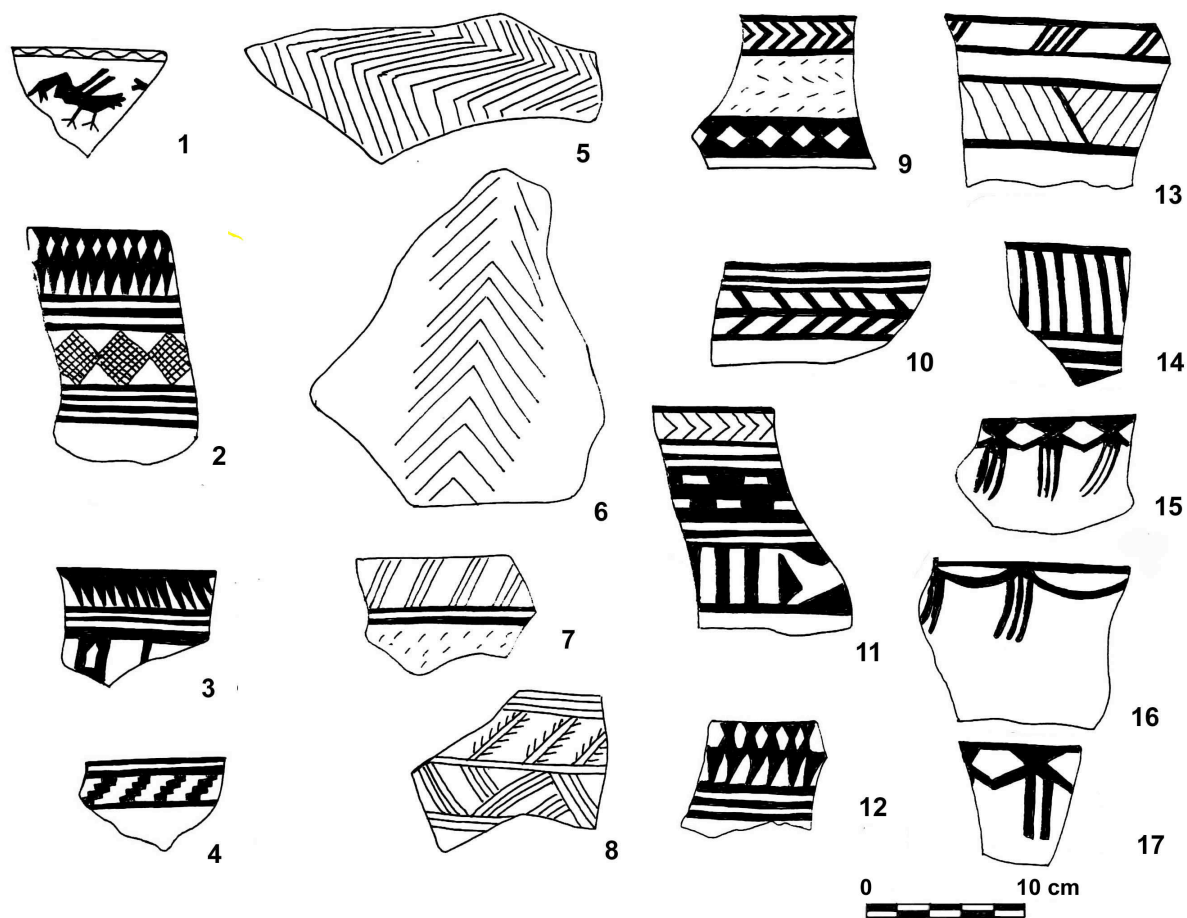


Figure 10. Drawings of Hassuna and Samarra period sherds.

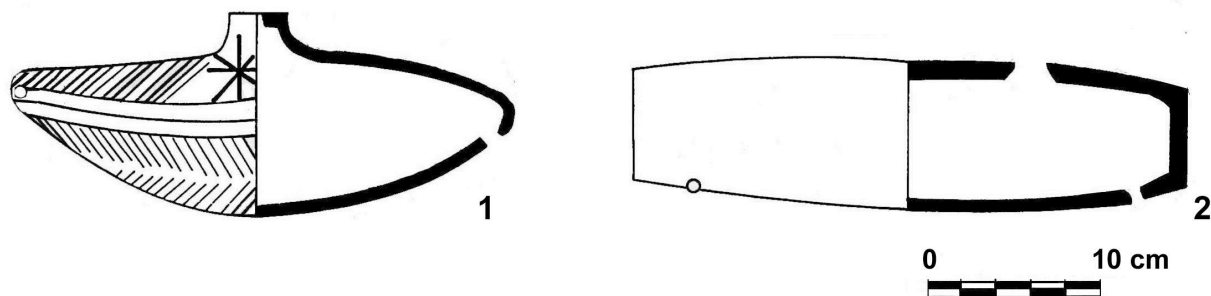


Figure 11. Complete vessels found in Sounding B.



Figure 12. Impressions of two clay stamp seals.

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